

Christ Church Elbow Park Archives

**Interview with Susan and Richard McCowan**

**Christ Church Elbow Park Oral History Project 2020**

Interviewer: Catherine Evamy

9 Dec 2020

2 PM

Zoom Interview

Transcript of Susan and Richard McCowan

Interviewed on 9 Dec. 2020

Christ Church Elbow Park Oral History Project 2020

Interviewed by Catherine Evamy

Catherine Evamy, Interviewer

Susan McCowan, Narrator

Richard McCowan, Narrator

**Catherine Evamy:** My name is Catherine Evamy and the date today is the ninth of December 2020. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, I am distance interviewing Christ Church parishioners, Richard and Susan McCowan.

This interview is being recorded for Christ Church archives, and will be made available to researchers. You will be given a transcript of the recording and you will have the opportunity to review it and reconsider any portions of the interview at that time. Is that okay with you?

**Susan McCowan:** Yes.

**Richard McCowan:** Yes.

**Catherine:** First of all, I'm really grateful that you've set aside time to do this. I understand that the McCowan family has been worshipping at Christ Church for three or four generations. I wonder if you could just speak a little bit about the beginnings of that story, Richard.

**Richard:** I know my mom went there as a young girl. My mom was Elizabeth Jane Gilbert. Jane was the name she answered to. She and my dad, Stuart, got married at Christ Church. My brother, Duncan, and I were both baptized at Christ Church. I sang in the choir, so we've had a long connection to it. The Gilberts, which is my mom's surname, went to Christ Church. My grandparents went there in the 1920s.

**Catherine:** Your grandparents, your parents, yourselves, and your children attended?

**Susan:** Yes, we have three children.

**Catherine:** Richard, were you involved in the Christ Church choir as a boy?

**Richard:** Yes.

**Catherine:** Were you there for several years?

**Richard:** Probably three years. I began when Mr. Marsden was our choirmaster. Then after that was Mr. Fullerton (and Fullerton became the organist with the Calgary Philharmonic).

**Catherine:** Was your brother a member, also?

**Richard:** Not of the choir, no. In his late teens he became a bell ringer.

**Catherine:** Did you take that up also?

**Richard:** No, I did not.

**Catherine:** Did you go to Camp Kananaskis as a boy?

**Richard:** Not as a camper. Thanks for reminding me. When I was 15 years old, I was talking to David Tatchell at the church and mentioned that I had been looking for a summer job and hadn't found anything. Within three days he had arranged for me to be a camp counsellor at Camp Kananaskis. It was a volunteer position.

**Catherine:** Were you and Susan married at Christ Church?

**Richard:** No, the timing didn't work. We got married in 1980, and we were living in Toronto at the time. We came back to be married, but David Tatchell had just left Christ Church and we didn't know the rector who had taken over.

**Susan:** We had gone to Woodcliff United Church for many years; our family were charter members of Woodcliff United. My mother worked as the church secretary for Reverend Norman Hunter for about 12 years. We had him marry us, because we knew one another, because we didn't know the new rector at Christ Church, so it seemed to make more sense to do that.

**Catherine:** Why were you in Toronto?

**Susan:** I had just completed a M.Sc. in Microbiology and took a job in research at the University of Toronto in 1978. Richard moved to Kingston in 1979 and worked in Microbiology research at Queen's University after he completed his M.Sc. at the University of Calgary. In 1980, I started a new job with Manulife as a computer programmer, we got married, and Richard started dental school in Toronto.

**Catherine:** That's where you took your dental training.

**Richard:** Yes.

**Catherine:** How long a course is that?

**Richard:** That is four years. After graduating, we came back to Alberta.

**Catherine:** Going back again to your family, you had lived in Elbow Park, so that's why you were parishioners at Christ Church. Is that right?

**Richard:** Yes.

**Susan:** Yes, Richard's maternal grandparents bought the house that we are in now, in about 1920. His mom was born in 1921.

**Richard:** In that house.

**Susan:** Then when his parents passed away we moved in, which would be 1991.

**Catherine:** If the house was built in 1921 that's just when Elbow Park was being developed.

**Susan:** It was actually built in 1914.

**Richard:** My grandparents were not the original owners. We do have some photographs of my mom, at four to six months of age, sitting on the front porch of the house. Behind her, Elbow Park was basically bald prairie.

**Catherine:** If you find any photographs in the old albums, it would be great to have any photographs that you'd be willing to donate to the archives, just to give the flavour of how it was in those days without trees.

**Richard:** When Blane Hogue used to do the neighbourhood Jane's walks, he always stopped at our house, and I would bring out the photos. I wish we had one that was more clearly looking towards Christ Church, but they come pretty close. It was just the basement of the church at that time.

**Catherine:** I know you both have been extremely involved in Christ Church. Richard, you've done so many things at Christ Church, what have been the highlights for you?

**Richard:** I ran the sidespeople (I think they were called sidesmen, at the time) for seven years. That was fairly rewarding.

I was very hands-on and very active in it. In some ways, the question is a challenging one. I've served on parish council twice now. It was during that time that I started questioning "How important is this to my faith or the faith of the church?" I realized that most of the jobs that I've had, including being a sidesperson, help keep the doors open at Christ Church, and that is a significant contribution to prayer and worship even though it's not a direct line. It took me some time to realize, "Yes, this is a very important role people have to fulfill, even though it's not a Sunday worship kind of thing."

Another highlight is when our children were in the choirs. For a few years, one or two of them would sing the first verse of "Once in Royal David's City" at the beginning of the 11:00 pm Christmas Eve service. We were proud to hear their lovely voices carry on this beautiful tradition.

I enjoyed carrying on my Dad's tradition of selling suits and menswear at all of the church rummage sales.

**Catherine:** There are different ways of expressing faith. I think you also organized a lot to do with Ansley's [Tucker] farewell party, the centennial party, and the Renewing the Welcome?

**Richard:** Yes.

**Catherine:** What were you involved with there?

**Richard:** Well, for the centennial party, I was responsible for making sure that most of the social events happened, the same with Ansley's farewell, the same with the Stampede breakfasts, and the same with David [Pickett]'s welcoming celebration. I guess at some point I got to be known as the person that helped make the parties happen and again, that's fellowship. That seems like an important thing to do.

**Catherine:** Is your daughter involved with Christ Church?

**Richard:** Well, actually we have a son, Dan, who is the oldest, and then Karen, and then Laura; they all sang in the choir, but after they hit high school, their interest in attending a formal church was just not there anymore.

**Catherine:** Susan, you also did lots of things in the church. Can you discuss some that have been really satisfying for you?

**Susan:** I grew up United and after we moved to Elbow Park and our kids were little, we thought we should get involved. We started bringing the kids to Sunday school, and I taught Sunday school. I think Lori Hamilton and I coordinated the Sunday school for two or three years when our kids were small. I did that and I've been involved with Altar Guild for a long time. I was President of Altar Guild, and then Meredith Cashion was President and then Meredith and I were Co-Presidents.

After about 10 years, just last year, Meredith and I decided to step back and Nancy Burns took over as Altar Guild President. That's been my main involvement, and then Richard and I have done the coffee hour after church for too many years. [laughs]

**Richard:** Yes, at least 15.

**Catherine:** That's great fellowship.

**Susan:** Yes.

**Richard:** Even though I'm not the person responsible for the Stampede Breakfast anymore, Susan is still the go-to person for making the pancake batter. She's been the official batter maker for almost 15 years, as well.

**Susan:** Well, we always bring a bag of the special Stampede mix every year. We use that every year and I've been the mixer.

I've also been a reader and a Communion Minister for several years now, too.

**Richard:** There's never been a time you haven't been involved in something from teaching Sunday School through to being responsible for running it. I think when you stepped down from that, you went into something else.

**Catherine:** Would you both be able to maybe sit down one afternoon and write up just a list, a CV?

**Susan:** I don't think I can come up with years. I might be able to. I think I have some old minutes from Altar Guild I could look at.

**Richard:** My maternal grandmother, Elizabeth Gilbert, received the 50-year pin for the ACW in the 1970s.

**Susan:** Yes, I was involved with ACW at some point too.

**Richard:** Yes, we can work on that.

**Catherine:** Have you had any time in your busy lives to be involved with some wider community causes, Elbow Park or the city, on committees or in other organizations?

**Susan:** Yes, I belong to an International Women's Group, mostly American, that supports education for women called the PEO Sisterhood.

**Catherine:** Can you tell me a little bit more about it?

**Susan:** It's an organization that started off as a sorority in Iowa, I think. They were college students, and they started this group mainly because they all didn't get invited to join another sorority. They now support educational projects. We have meetings and do fundraising and they have loans and grants and they support international students, people that have been away from school for a couple of years, and give them grants to get back and improve their education.

**Catherine:** You were busy with your dental practice, Richard, so you didn't really have time to be involved in community affairs?

**Richard:** No. In a way, a lot of my involvement was related to dentistry. I served on the Calgary District Dental Society executive a couple of times. We put together courses and social events for dentists in and around Calgary; that had a membership of 600 to 700 dentists. For well over a decade, I served on disciplines hearing committee for the dental association.

Going back to 1986, I helped to write one of our more original infection control protocols for the dental association. That was a special committee. I wasn't serving on the Calgary dental society at that time. It was just more my background pre-dentistry and methodology that helped me on that committee.

**Catherine:** You've been at Christ Church for a long time and there have been many changes over the years. What changes do you recognize as being significant?

**Richard:** I think the standout for me is how lucky we've been with our rectors. Serving as I did with the sidespeople, I got to see transitions every time a new rector would come in, and just how they would change the environment. Sometimes I liked the changes and sometimes I didn't, but as Susan pointed out to me, Christ Church is our home. You stay and you look after your home.

**Susan:** I think at one point, when our children were in the choir we were thinking, "Oh, should we go somewhere else?" For a short time, we weren't particularly happy with the rector, and I said, "No. Our church is right down the street, our children are involved. If we go somewhere else and have to drive, our kids won't want to come and that would be the end of church for them." We thought, "We know that rectors don't stay forever. All our friends are here. The church is right down the street. There's no reason to move."

**Richard:** I was happiest at Christ Church and I had friends there. One of the reasons I'm an Anglican is because you are not expected to leave your opinions at the door. I've really appreciated how most of our rectors challenged us to truly think for ourselves, and to think about our faith. They've all had different gifts that they were able to share with us.

**Catherine:** What other characteristics of Christ Church do you find meaningful?

**Richard:** A rector or a minister who's open and welcoming, doesn't mean the congregation necessarily is. But, a major characteristic of Christ Church is that the congregation is very open and welcoming.

**Catherine:** I've heard people remarking that we are a fairly homogenous congregation, partly because it is a neighbourhood church and you can't access it readily by bus for the downtown people or indigenous people or people with mobility issues. It's not easily accessible. Therefore, we tend to perhaps be more homogenous than let's say St. Steven's or the cathedral.

**Susan:** That's true.

**Richard:** Okay. Although, again, I was on parish council with Ansley Tucker for the longest time, and I know that she really preferred to call us, *Christ Church Calgary* not *Christ Church Elbow Park*. She was really trying hard to extend our range.

I thought she was quite successful with that. We still have quite a few people that will drive long distances to get to Christ Church, but still there are mobility issues, for sure.

**Catherine:** Are there other characteristics of Christ Church that make it special?

**Susan:** The beauty of the church and the tradition and ambience of the church is very special.

**Richard:** We're a very homogeneous group, as you said; that's because of who we are and where we live, but I've always been aware that the members of Christ Church punch well above their weight for what they have done for the larger community of Calgary.

I think of Lorraine Melchior and her involvement with CUPS. The amount of involvement that Christ Church has had with the homeless and with trying to improve the world for those that are hurting most; I would say that's another major part of Christ Church.

**Susan:** You did *Inn From The Cold* for several years.

**Richard:** Yes, and I got to know Lorraine Melchior a bit through CUPS. I was one of about 50 dentists that volunteered at the CUPS clinics on a regular basis.

**Catherine:** You volunteered there?

**Richard:** Yes.

**Susan:** I was involved with Sparks and Brownies. When our daughter was about five, I thought she would enjoy Sparks. That's the youngest ones, the five and six-year-olds. I got a Sparks unit started at Christ Church and then both daughters went to that and I ran that Sparks unit. When the girls went into Brownies and then Guides, I didn't continue as a leader, but I was the treasurer for the Brownies and Guides for quite some time.

**Richard:** That reminds me, I was scoutmaster at the church for two years.

**Catherine:** Members of Christ Church have participated in so many community activities within the city and beyond. Faith is demonstrated and values are modelled in many other areas than just in church on Sundays.

**Richard:** A St. Francis of Assisi quote goes something like, "You should be preaching the gospel at all times, and sometimes you should speak."

**Catherine:** Young people today don't necessarily relate to the traditional language or the traditional stories used at church.



**Richard:** Our kids were all around age of 14 and 15 and they were still active at Christ Church and they went on summer camps with --?

**Susan:** Young Life.

**Richard:** It was very Evangelical and by the time they were done at camp, they never wanted to set foot in the church again. Dan came home and said, "Dad, I was there a whole week, and I never once heard the word *love* used. But there was a lot of hate in what they talked about."

Our kids' generation would be saying, "LGBTQ are normal people," and kids at this camp would be taught that these are sinners that will go to hell and burn forever. By the time our kids were done at camp, they were done with church.

**Susan:** Well, there is a minister / a street preacher (who has nothing to do with Christ Church) right now that got a ticket because he was in the anti-mask rallies and I thought, "This is a message that influences youth." It says, "I'm more interested in my rights than actually showing love to my neighbours."

**Richard:** This is the same fellow that got in trouble with the city because he had loudspeakers that would upset neighbours in the parks in Sundays. Quite a guy.

**Catherine:** Is there anything else that you would like to add or talk about?

**Susan:** One other thing that Richard has done: he helped with the PWRDF [Primate's World Relief and Development Fund], the last couple of years he helped with the Christmas campaign and encouraged congregants to donate. He was able to significantly increase the donations from Christ Church.

**Richard:** I'm on council still, but I'm really impressed with how David [Pickett] is really working hard for a legacy fund for things that will keep Christ Church's doors open long after we are gone. I'm really happy to see that happening.

**Catherine:** Have we, do you think, covered the matters that we want to have recorded?

**Susan:** I think Christ Church has been a real center to our lives because it's right down the street, so many of our friends are there, we've had such a family involvement, that it has been very important to us over the years. It's important for us to see it continue on, and it makes me happy to see it be as successful as it is.

**Catherine:** A positive note to end on. I thank you both very much again for taking the time to do this. We would look forward to whatever you can write and whatever you can find in the way of artifacts or photos and things of that nature.

I wish you all the best for the Christmas season, the different Christmas season.

**Richard:** Thank you for doing this.